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ABSTRACT

Three recent studies have focused upon prereading children's concepts of written language, what they think words are, and how they understand the concept of a word. These explorations of young children's early attempts to understand and produce writing have important implications for the preschool and primary classroom. R. D. Morris found that first graders' concepts of a word in print as a bound configuration was related to their phoneme segmentation ability and to success in beginning to read. Based on these findings, a teacher could recite the lines of simple rhymes while pointing to the words and then ask children individually to point to the words as the rhyme is recited. It can be assumed that the child who cannot make the speech-to-print match after memorizing the rhyme does not yet possess the conceptual frame for reading. M. J. Kita explored prereaders' concepts of the purposes for reading and writing. She found that children have a better grasp of the purposes for writing than of the purposes for reading, indicating that early writing experience eases children into beginning reading. C. A. Temple related the strategies of young English speaking spellers to those of children speaking Spanish and found the same types of systematic misspellings, in spite of the regularity of Spanish phonology. This finding suggests that teachers should view children's invented spellings as positive attempts to represent speech rather than as errors. (MKM)

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Pedagogical Implications of Concept of Word Research

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Several recent studies have focused upon the prereading child's concepts of written language. These explorations of young children's early attempts to understand and produce writing have important implications for the preschool and primary classroom.

Morris (1979, 1980; Morris & Henderson, 1979) has explored prereaders' ability to match spoken and written words in a memorized rhyme and compared this to their ability to segment spoken words into phonetic components and their beginning to read in first grade. He found that first graders' concept of a word in print as a bound configuration was related to their phoneme segmentation ability and to

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success in beginning to read. These findings have implications for beginning reading instruction.

The "concept of word" task Morris used with his subjects could be used in late kindergarten and first grade for informal readiness screening. A teacher could sit down with a small group, perhaps three or four children, and conduct a lesson as Morris described, wherein the children would be taught to recite a simple rhyme, then recite the lines while pointing to them, and finally attempt individually to point to each word as the rhyme is recited. Administration of this procedure takes less time per pupil than administering a standardized readiness battery, and has several advantages. One is that the procedure is naturalistic, allowing assessment within an actual teaching situation. Another is that the information yielded is qualitative rather than quantitative; rather than numerical scores, the teacher derives direct information about a child's degree of experience with print, what the child's present conception of "a word" is, and what sort of prereading or beginning reading experience will be most successful.

The child who can successfully "voice-point", physically demonstrating recognition of words as bound elements matching speech, is signalling readiness for beginning reading instruction. For that child, the conceptual framework of the printed word has been formed, and the internal elements of words can be studied. This forms the foundation for instruction in word recognition and word analysis, basic components of beginning reading.

The child who cannot make the speech-to-print match after memorizing the rhyme does not yet possess the conceptual frame, and early reading instruction focusing on the internal elements of words (letters and sounds) will likely prove confusing and frustrating. This child needs further experience with print before formal instruction begins. The child should be supported in meaningful contact with print, helping the child develop the auditory memory and oral language facility prereaders need. Supportive activities include frequent choral reading of dictated stories, liberal use of rhythmic, repetitious "patterned" trade books and poems, and frequent reading to the child where the print can be seen as well as the voice heard, with the reader sweeping a hand under the print as it is read.

Morris views the concept of word attainment as a watershed event in learning to read (Morris & Henderson, 1979). The child's discovery that printed words match spoken utterances is fundamental to the development of the sight vocabulary and the growth of word analysis strategies, both aspects of word recognition which are emphasized in early reading instruction. Many widely used programs, however, introduce letters and sounds before the word concept may be attained. This assumes a child can be taught to manipulate the inner structures of words even before the words themselves can be located on the page. This assumption bears close scrutiny.

A study closely related to Morris' is Kita's (1979, 1980) exploration of prereaders' concepts of the purposes of reading and writing. Kita found that young children have a better grasp of the purposes for writing than of the purposes for reading. One of her

subjects observed that "writing helps you know how to read." This child has articulated the position of Marie Clay, Carol Chomsky and others who have found that early writing experience helps ease children into beginning reading. A young writer is forced to attend systematically to features of words - letters, sounds, and word boundaries. A young writer knows the communicative function of written language, and understands that print is a systematic code. As the young writer invents words and spellings and finds that others cannot read them, the conception is formed that print is not random or arbitrary; a writer can only make up so much, and some things must be done as everyone else does, In this conformity there is comfort, though, for if everyone writes words in similar ways, one ought eventually to be able to read not only one's own, but everyone else's words as well. In the young writer's mind is sown the seed of confidence that "I can learn to read too".

This points to the urgent need for prereaders and beginning readers to engage in much creative writing, in which expression is prized and correctness of mechanics is downplayed for a time. Because the young writer must attend to print in order to produce it, early writing experience makes the study of words self-directed rather than entirely teacher-directed. In writing, children manipulate and experiment with print elements concretely, and we have learned from child development theory the necessity for the young to manipulate and discover features of things for themselves through direct, concrete experience.

The element of experimentation and invention has been elaborated in Temple's (1978, 1979) work. Studies of children's early spelling strategies (Beers & Henderson, 1977; Gentry, 1978; Read, 1975; Templeton, 1979) preceding Temple's laid down an empirical foundation for the assertions that children's early spelling errors are systematic, are based on highly discriminated phonetic judgments, and follow predictable patterns across regional and dialectic boundaries. Temple's work relates the strategies young English speaking spellers use to those of children speaking Spanish.

He has found that Spanish speaking children use strategies to represent ambiguous sounds in Spanish in much the same ways young spellers in English do. Early use of letter names to represent some sounds, omission of letters representing preconsonantal nasals, and phonetic renderings of ambiguous consonants are predictable inventions appearing in young Spanish speakers' writing. In spite of the famed regularity of Spanish phonology, the same types of systematic misspellings occur in both Spanish and English.

Teachers of young children who speak either language must be informed about the predictable nature of early spelling efforts, and should know what types of errors are normal, so that they avoid viewing their students as "spelling disabled" when predictable spelling inventions appear. It is important that teachers view children's invented spellings as positive attempts to represent speech rather than as errors to be avoided at all costs.

Temple's analysis of spelling strategies reveals that even in phonetically regular Spanish, a good speller cannot always depend on

sound to produce correct spellings. This is decidedly the case in English, which has many more ambiguous sound features. Spelling reformists have long sought to reduce English orthography to about 44 graphic symbols representing a 1:1 correspondence between grapheme and phoneme. The largely invariant letter-sound correspondences of Spanish have been a source of pride to Spanish orthographers. However spelling is based not only on speech sounds, which are widely divergent, but on encoded meaning relationships. Signals of meaning relationships exist in orthography to give the reader semantic information.

An example (Gillet & Temple, 1978) is the attempt by the young child to spell sign. Depending only on sound, the youngster would likely produce SIN or SINE. But the spelling of sign encodes a meaning relationship to signal, and both are derived from a common Latin base. If a speller is aware of how words are related etymologically, and that orthography reflects these relationships, levels beyond the surface structures of sound can be explored. A child who is aware of the meaning shared by sign and signal is unlikely to omit the g in writing sign. To develop as fully competent spellers children in both languages must be shown how these features are represented, and spelling instruction must include the study of etymology and word meanings.

A classroom vehicle for meaning-based word study is the word sort (Gillet & Kita, 1979; Gillet & Temple, 1978). Sorts are categorizing activities in which students arrange words on cards into groups based on a shared feature or set of features. Features can be

graphic, phonological, structural, syntactic or semantic aspects, or combinations of these. In closed sorts a feature is specified before sorting begins, and words are searched for the presence of that feature. In the foregoing case, students might be instructed to search for other words sharing the base sig- and related to the concept of marking or conveying information, starting with sign and signal. Students might come up with signature, signet, resignation, resign, designate, and assign to fit the category.

In open sorts words are grouped by shared aspects as they suggest themselves, with no criterion specified in advance. This can be accomplished in a guessing game format, as children form their own groups and try to figure out others' bases for grouping. These activities encourage students to look beyond the phonological features of words and explore the richness and complexity of orthography. Children speaking English or Spanish can become better spellers by such word study.

The studies cited represent current attempts to explore the young child's concepts of what written words are and how they are produced. The studies also represent research with clearly evident pedagogical implications which can be translated into improved classroom practice.

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